

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(July 15, 2018)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Mission, Fueled by a Vision

(Studies in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah)

Choosing a God-Centered Life

(Nehemiah 11-12)

Study #14

Introduction: Preparing for a rich harvest...

I lost my spring garden to that horrible early June heat wave, so now it's about time to get ready for a fall garden. Seriously. Over the next two or three weeks I'll be getting the garden soil ready to re-plant tomatoes, green beans, and squash.

Preparing the garden involves tilling the soil, adding organic material, and keeping it all at least somewhat moist during what is now the JULY drought and heat wave.

Kathy's grandfather, an Ohio dairy farmer, was a master at adding organic material to his fields. I remember being fascinated by his farming operation - and especially by his barn - when our family took a trip to visit him over twenty years ago.

Since he ran a dairy along with his farming, there were stanchions and stalls in the barn for his cows. At milking time, the cows were herded into the barn and would be lined up, side by side, with the two rows of cows facing each other, head to head.

Then, conveniently located near the south end of each cow was a six-inch deep, foot and a half wide trench in the barn's cement floor.

Kathy's grandfather was a very efficient farmer. He used everything the cows would give him. And I mean *everything*.

What came out of the south end of the cow dropped neatly into the trench. Grandpa Jagers would then haul it out of the barn to his fields and spread it on thick as a fertilizer. It's called "manuring."

I get organic material to prepare my small garden from the store. He got his organic material for the farm, more or less, straight from the "horse's mouth." He knew, and all farmers and gardeners know, that soil preparation is crucial for a rich harvest.

Preparation, generally, is crucial for a good end.

That's why we urge pre-marital counseling. A good education prepares for a good career. Lots of practice time makes for a great performance in sports or in the arts.

And everything you and I have seen to this point in the book of Nehemiah has been preparation. The Jews have been about the work of manuring for the harvest of a rich life of worship and service to God. And we're going to see its beginning today.

Today, we finally come to the high point in our study of the book of Nehemiah.

Review...

Our look into the life and times of Nehemiah began back in May. Throughout our exploration of his book, we've seen a man whose vision brought about dramatic change for the people of God in his day.

Nehemiah's burden for Jerusalem's welfare prompted him to risk his life to beg the Persian king, Artaxerxes, to let him go and restore the city. Artaxerxes said, "Yes", and off to Jerusalem Nehemiah went.

We listened to him rally the citizens of the city to join him in the work and watched as they "***put their hands to the good work.***"

We've stood in awe of their perseverance to keep building despite opposition. We rejoiced to see the wall around the city rebuilt in fifty-two days after one hundred and fifty years of ruin.

And then, just as we thought it was "Mission: Accomplished" we came to see that the building of that wall was only Phase I of a two phase project.

The larger point of what was going on was spiritual renewal, a renewal that wouldn't have taken place without the outer protection of a physical wall.

After the completion of the wall, the people fixed their focus squarely on God.

- They found by reading the Bible that they were to observe the Feast of Tabernacles by living in tents for a week. So, they did exactly that. (chapter 8)
- The winds of revival began blowing as they confessed their sins to God. (chapter 9)
- Those winds kept blowing as they moved from confession to promising that they would do what God told them to do when it came to marriage, Sabbath-keeping, and money. (chapter 10)

For them to have done all this was to have taken giant steps on the road to spiritual maturity and health. And it is what led to what we are about to see today.

Preview...

I'm dividing what remains of Nehemiah into three unequal sections. Two we'll see today; one is for next week.

First, Nehemiah takes time to affirm heroes who have made a difference - and we'll do the same.
 Second, and where we'll spend the bulk of our time this morning, we get to see a worship service to remember.
 Third, next Sunday, we'll see a royal mess - which will spark a vision for messiness, here. (Messiness. Yes!)

Today, we will witness two calls to give "praise and honor" to certain parties. One of these parties is much more important than the other. But, the first is not trivial. Nehemiah gives us a roll call of unsung heroes.

I am going to take just a moment or two to tell you something about these names. And then, based on an understanding of what these names signify, I'm going to suggest an application assignment for each one of us here today.

In Praise of Unsung Heroes... (11:3--12:26)

In Nehemiah 11:3 though 12:26, we read four separate lists of names. These lists identify those people who had been instrumental in bringing the Jews to the high point of the present moment.

- 11:3-24 - Nehemiah first gives us the names of the major families who were living in Jerusalem. These are the descendants of Judah and Benjamin (vv. 3-9), the priests and Levites (vv. 10-18), and the gatekeepers and civic leaders (vv. 19-24) in Jerusalem.
- 11:25-36 - Here, we read about some of those who continued to live in the outlying areas. These did NOT move to Jerusalem. They did, however, contribute to the nation's progress through their faithful service to God where they had always lived.
- 12:1-11 - Here we find the names of the priests and other leaders who returned to Palestine with Zerubbabel to rebuild the temple.¹
- 12:12-26 - Finally, Nehemiah listed the descendants of those pioneers who were serving God at the time he wrote, there in Jerusalem.²

¹ Remember, this was seventy years before Ezra returned and eighty-five years before Nehemiah came to Jerusalem.

² Scholarly debate rages concerning some *apparent* discrepancies in the lists of the names of priests and Levites at various places in Nehemiah. The apparently conflicting lists are reconcilable, although to reconcile them one must come from the perspective of believing that they are reconcilable, rather than from the perspective of trying to find a problem. I won't get into the technicalities of the debate here, but can direct you, if you wish, to Gleason Archer's book, [A Survey of Old Testament Introduction](#) (pp. 410-416), or to Cyril Barbers' commentary, [Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership](#), op. cit. for helpful comments.

The focus in these lists is on those wonderful men and women who agreed to move to Jerusalem, a city on the mend, a city with a glorious past and a hopefully - but not a guaranteed - glorious future.

These heroes and their families moved to Jerusalem NOT because the Bible told them to, but because their hearts yearned to make a difference for God's Kingdom.

So, why did Nehemiah list the names of these people in the permanent record of his book?

Very simply he wanted to express his *"Thanks"* to the initiators, the trailblazers, and the entrepreneurs who had paved the way for the nation to thrive.

He and everyone with him in Jerusalem were standing on the verge of success because they were standing on the shoulders of the giants who had gone before them.

This record of their names honors and affirms their sacrificial contributions, the dividends of which Nehemiah and those with him were reaping.

Since Nehemiah took the time and gave the space in his book to include the names of people who helped him, I see an application project for us, today.

Application project

First, I would invite you to think back over your life with God.

At whatever point you are in learning about Jesus - maybe you're just starting out or you've been following for a while or you've been trusting Jesus for decades - remember those who helped you grow in the past and think about those who are helping you take next steps now.

Would you take a moment, right now, to thank God for them?

Thank God for the contribution to your life that THAT guy, THAT gal, made to your walk with God? Pray God's rich blessings in his/her life.

And, then, would you thank him? Thank her?

Jot a note/card/letter/text/email. Make a phone call. Take that person out for a cup of coffee or a meal to simply say, *"Thanks for being God's instrument in my life."*

And then, consider those around you who serve so well. There are heroes all around you who teach your children and lead you in worship and pray for you and serve you in Jesus' Name in all kinds of wonderful, God-honoring ways. Would you thank them? Affirm them.

Tell the people who have pressed Jesus into your life and into the lives of those you love and into this faith community how much their investment means to you.

So, that's one thing. Just like Nehemiah did in his day, thank those who have paved the way for your growth and development.

Here's the second. Thank God for His many mercies.

That's what we've been aiming at for the past thirteen weeks. Nehemiah has written in praise of the wonderful servants of God. Now he tells us about Israel's worship of their wonderful God.³

What we are about to see is a worship service. And we believe that every worship service is special. This one was EXTRA special

This was not a normal Jewish Sabbath worship service. This was a service of worship to God at the dedication of the wall around the city of Jerusalem.

³ We are not given dates for this worship service. It may have taken place immediately after the completion of the wall re-building project. Or, (more likely) it might have occurred some months after the wall was finished.

This was one of those momentous moments when you pull out all the stops in celebration of the goodness and the greatness and the grace of God.

Some of the teens who have just returned from Challenge have told me about the rich experience of being with thousands of others in worship. That's pretty special.

As we turn to Nehemiah 12, think Challenge. Think NIOSA without the excesses, a NIOSA of praise and worship, a fiesta to God.

And if this is going to be a worship service to remember, certain key players had to be there.

In Praise of God! (12:27-43)

The PLAYERS in a Worship Service to Remember (12:27-30)

Invite the Levites to the dedication of the wall (v. 27)

[27] Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites from all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem so that they might celebrate the dedication with gladness, with hymns of thanksgiving and with songs to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps, and lyres.

They needed the Levites at the dedication service because the Levites knew all the right tunes. They were the musicians in Israel.

Scattered all throughout the Judean hill country were the best harpists, cymbalists, tambourinists, percussionists, and zitherists in the land. They were all called to the city for this grand event.

Another group, the singers, was invited to Jerusalem for this special celebration.

Invite the singers to the dedication of the wall (vv. 28-29)

[28] So the sons of the singers were assembled from the district around Jerusalem, and from the villages of the Netophathites, [29] from Beth-gilgal, and from their fields in Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built themselves villages around Jerusalem.

The singers had settled down in the suburbs surrounding Jerusalem. They were called to the big city for the great day of dedication.

Music, led by trained singers and trained musicians, would provide for a great time of worship on the day of dedication.

And people were invited to Jerusalem - all the people.

Invite all the people to the dedication of the wall (v. 30)

[30] And the priests and the Levites purified themselves; they also purified the people, the gates, and the wall.

These are the Jews who lived inside the walls of Jerusalem, in the suburbs around Jerusalem, in the more outlying areas, and throughout Palestine.

Everybody was invited to worship.⁴ And, with all the players in their places and everybody ready to give thanks to the Lord, the dedication service began.

There is a lot of movement in this worship service. We trace the movements of two specially designated marching choirs.

Choreography in This Worship Service to Remember (vv. 31-39)

⁴ Bathing was a ritual preparation for worship.

The leaders on top of the wall (v. 31a)

[31a] Then I had the leaders of Judah come up on top of the wall, and I appointed two great choirs

Nehemiah is wearing a hat here that we haven't seen him wear. We know him as a man of prayer, a superb administrator, a military strategist, and a courageous statesman.

Now we find that he's also a skilled worship choreographer.

With the singers and the musicians positioned at set locations ON TOP OF THE WALL, the first choir starts marching.

The movements of the choirs (vv. 31b-39)

First choir (vv. 31b-37)

[31b] the first proceeding to the right on top of the wall toward the Refuse Gate. [32] Hoshaiiah and half of the leaders of Judah followed them, [33] with Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, [34] Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah, [35] and some of the sons of the priests with trumpets; and Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph, [36] and his kinsmen, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God. And Ezra the scribe went before them. [37] And at the Fountain Gate they went directly up the steps of the city of David by the stairway of the wall above the house of David to the Water Gate on the east.

We recognize some of the names in this first choir.

We know Ezra.⁵ We've met him before. He came to Jerusalem fifteen years earlier, before Nehemiah got there, to re-establish worship in the city.

⁵ He's a major Old Testament hero and most believe that he wrote 1 and 2 Chronicles as well as the Bible book that bears his name.

Ezra was a serious Bible student, a gifted teacher and a courageous man of God. On this day, he's marching around the city with the choir, singing his lungs out to God.

Other names we recognize as the builders on the wall that now protects the city. They are marching on top of that wall they built.

Beginning at a certain, designated place (perhaps near the Valley Gate, on the western side of the city), they marched south - and counter-clockwise - to the Refuse Gate and then north past the Fountain Gate. When it came to the Water Gate (on the east side of the city), this choir halted.

Now, we trace the route of a second choir.

Second choir (vv. 38-39)

[38] The second choir proceeded to the left, while I followed them with half of the people on the wall, above the Tower of Furnaces, to the Broad Wall, [39] and above the Gate of Ephraim, by the Old Gate, by the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel, and the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate, and they stopped at the Gate of the Guard.

The way I read this is that Nehemiah himself marched with the second choir.

Beginning at the same place as the first choir - the Refuse Gate - they moved clockwise, to the left (i.e. north), marching around the city, again, on top of the wall.⁶

They passed the gates on the western and northern parts of the walls (Old Gate, Fish Gate, Sheep Gate), and stopped at the Gate of the Guard, or what was also known as the "Muster Gate."

⁶ Remember Tobiah's taunting, *[4:3] "If a fox should jump on the wall, it would fall down!"*? Well, the Jews have chosen a great place to showcase the strength of the wall by holding the dedication to the wall on the top of it!

All the while the two choirs are marching around the city, the singers are singing and the instrumentalists are lugging around their instruments and playing them.

The two choirs made their way to their stopping points. Choir #1 at the Gate of the Guard; Choir #2 at the Water Gate. Both of these gates are on the east side of the city. Both located near the temple.

Imagine the scene. For a moment, the singing stops. The city is silent.

And then - both choirs started marching and singing again.

They descended stairs from the top of the wall while making music, to make their way to their final destination, the high point of the city and the heart of the nation's life with God.

They entered the temple precincts.

O Come, Let Us Adore Him! (vv. 40-43)

[40] Then the two choirs took their stand in the house of God. So did I and half of the officials with me; [41] and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with the trumpets; [42] and Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. And the singers sang, with Jezrahiah their leader, [43] and on that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar.⁷

There, in the temple's outer court, with the government officials, priests, and Levites present, with Ezra and Nehemiah both present, and with all the people there, they worshipped the Lord with all their hearts for all that He had done for them.

⁷ For comparison, the ceremonies for the dedication of Solomon's Temple lasted seven full days.

The singing was so loud that the Arabs and the Horonites and the Canaanites and the Ammonites could hear. They offered so many sacrifices that the smoke could be seen rising for miles.

The work - done together - was done. It was done by the grace of God and for the glory of God. Finally, the city is secure and populated with people whose joy-filled hearts are revived.

Jerusalem is poised to become that beautiful city on a hill it was always meant to be.

It's all wonderful. And what's most wonderful is that we now find out that the point of this celebration was not to have a one-time celebration.

The people determined they were going to make worship and serving God a non-stop, every-day priority.

Making Worship an On-Going Priority (12:44-47)

[44] On that day men were also appointed over the chambers for the stores, the contributions, the first fruits, and the tithes, to gather into them from the fields of the cities the portions required by the law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who served. [45] For they performed the worship of their God and the service of purification, together with the singers and the gatekeepers in accordance with the command of David and of his son Solomon. [46] For in the days of David and Asaph, in ancient times, there were leaders of the singers, songs of praise and hymns of thanksgiving to God.

[47] And so all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah gave the portions due the singers and the gatekeepers as each day required, and set apart the consecrated portion for the Levites, and the Levites set apart the consecrated portion for the sons of Aaron.

On the day of the dedication of the wall - after that time in corporate worship they would never forget - the people put in place the infrastructure necessary for an on-going, God-centered life.

They appointed certain men to oversee the supplies of food and money that would support the priests and the Levites, just like Moses commanded in the Law.

Those supplies meant support for sacrifices and offerings, support for leadership at regular Sabbath services, and support for the occasional walk-on-top-of-the-wall worship extravaganza.

In addition, they appointed people who would lead in music - singers and players - year 'round, just as had been done in the glory days of David and Solomon.⁸

Conclusion:

And with that, the revival Nehemiah had prayed for and dreamed of back in Persia (chapter 1) has come to maturity.

After putting their backs into wall-building, they put their hearts into confession.

Then, they promised to obey particulars of God's Law. They promised to marry within the family of faith and to remember the Sabbath to keep in holy.

And they have now prepared (think, manured) the soil of Jerusalem for an on-going harvest of God-centered living.

The Bible promises that people find joy in the presence and in the service of God. So, it's no surprise that Nehemiah 12 - the chapter of fulfillment - is the happiest chapter in the book.

(I won't pretend that Nehemiah doesn't have a chapter 13. We'll see it next week, to be reminded that even with promises in place, life is always going to be messy and that THIS is not heaven...)

⁸ In David's day, praise, hymns, and thanksgivings were normal parts of the national life. It was the accepted norm that worship was important and a vital priority. Back then, the people esteemed their spiritual leaders. Now all of that is being repeated here in the days of Nehemiah.

And, while we're happy for the happiness of the Jews of 445 BC, Jerusalem, this is 2018. We're not followers of Moses. We're followers of Jesus. And what was true for them is *doubly* true for us.

We serve the same God they served. But, we serve God under a far better arrangement than they did.

They had priests and Levites. We have a great High Priest, Jesus, who lives forever. They offered lambs and goats, daily, weekly, annually. Our sacrifice, the Lord Jesus, was offered once for all.

God has indwelt us in the Person of the Holy Spirit. We are united with every other person who has trusted in Christ, so we're all in this together. And He has given us transcendent meaning, life eternal and abundant, and He's invited us to join Him in a Great Commission.

Every week, we come together to worship a risen, living Savior. Every day, we serve this Savior.

So, let's do all we can to manure our souls for a rich harvest for God.

Let's fertilize with confession of sin. Ask God to open your eyes to see where you've strayed so that you can confess, receive His cleansing, and walk in the light again.

Let's resolve / promise, by the power of the Spirit and with the support of this community, to obey all that Jesus has commanded. That's what taking next steps with Jesus is all about.

Because of all the grace you've received in Jesus, take whatever next step into faith, obedience, submission, love, prayer, or generosity is your need of the hour.

And may our confessions and our promises all have one end: That we would lead lives that honor the Lord Jesus Christ.

As Paul writes, ***[Romans 12:1] Therefore, I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. [2] And do not be conformed to this world, but be***

transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

We praise and honor our God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - this God who is awesome and holy and loving and gracious; this God who has redeemed us, made us a part of His forever family, forgiven us all our sins, and given us a certain future in Heaven with Him throughout eternity.

We have so much for which to praise Him. What a great God we serve. He has truly done great things!